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SARAH WOOTTON

The Changing Faces of the Byronic Hero in *Middlemarch* and *North and South*

Almost two hundred years after the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the Byronic hero remains, as Andrew Elfenbein argues, an 'unprecedented cultural phenomenon'.¹ This essay is not concerned with the more direct descendants of the Byronic hero (Rochester and Heathcliff, for example); rather, I shall be focusing on the less immediately obvious, and in some respects more complex, reincarnations of the Byronic hero in two nineteenth-century novels, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. Establishing previously neglected connections between these authors and the figure of the Byronic hero not only opens new avenues of debate in relation to these novels, but also permits a reassessment of the extent and significance of Byron's influence in the Victorian period. The following questions will be addressed: first, why does a Byronic presence feature so prominently in the work of nineteenth-century women writers; second, what is distinctive about Eliot and Gaskell's respective treatments of this figure; and, third, how is the Byronic hero subsequently reinvented, and to what effect, in modern screen adaptations of their work?

Critical interest concerning the inheritance of the Byronic hero has traditionally centred on male writers (ranging from Melville and Edgar Allan Poe to Charles Dickens and Pushkin). Recently, however, Susan Wolfson's essay on

Felicia Hemans and Byronic Romance argued for the impact of Byron's work on this female poet, and explored the intricacies of a literary relationship that culminated, for Hemans, in an 'oppositional conversation'.² Similarly, a published lecture by Caroline Franklin has investigated the ambivalent responses of women writers to the cult of Byronism in the nineteenth century (focusing mainly on Harriet Beecher Stowe). According to Franklin, depicting this figure facilitated a paradoxical position of 'conservatism and radical vision'.³ During the nineteenth century, the Byronic hero acted as a model of profligacy to be denounced, thereby reinforcing women's assumed spiritual superiority, whilst also evoking a subversive voice. Women writers retained their propriety and gained an attitude of defiance, a controversial edge, from this notorious figure. Most importantly, literary engagements with the Byronic hero afforded women writers of this period an opportunity to probe and renegotiate a range of gendered identities.

George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell seek to redefine masculinity in their work. J. R. Watson argues that Gaskell answered Byron's famous call in *Don Juan*, 'I want a hero', by 'provid[ing] them in every story and every novel'.⁴ The most innovative aspect of Gaskell's fiction, according to Joseph Kestner, is her ability to 'defamiliarize and individuate male prototypes',

a position elaborated upon by Catherine Barnes Stevenson who states that Gaskell, bettering even Charlotte Brontë, 'wrote the masculine'.⁵ Eliot was equally instrumental in reformulating contemporary models of masculinity. *Middlemarch*, in its insistence on the communal, can be read as an antiheroic novel with Lydgate as an underachiever and Ladislav as an insubstantial *dilettante*. Mario Praz stated that, in fact, Eliot's microscopic attention to the imperfect and disparate details of human life 'led to the eclipse of the hero'.⁶ However, as I argue in this essay, Eliot's approach to her male characters is more complex and challenging than this position allows. Neither endorsing nor rejecting the Romantic hero, both Eliot and Gaskell subject this figure to rigorous psychological scrutiny: the Byronic hero is certainly refashioned, and even rehabilitated, yet his presence remains.

In addition to the contentious issues relating to masculinity, the Byronic hero also plays a pivotal role in the interconnections that both Eliot and Gaskell form between gender politics and social change. *Middlemarch*, set immediately prior to the Reform Bill of 1832, is a novel infused with possibilities (even if they remain unfulfilled), and its political concerns offset and reflect upon the relative positions and ambitions of male and female characters. Similarly, the potential for change in *North and South* is generated by forcing together Margaret and Thornton's evolving relationship with the clashes between masters and men. As Gaskell wrote,

I suppose we all *do* strengthen each other by clashing together, and earnestly talking our own thoughts and ideas. The very disturbance we thus are to each other rouses us up, and makes us more healthy.⁷

Corresponding with Gaskell's ethos, the figure of the Byronic hero offers a 'disruptive dialectic', a positive discord which prompts growth.⁸ The Byronic hero presented a unique

opportunity for Eliot and Gaskell to enter current debates about masculinity; furthermore, this figure served both novelists as a means of surreptitiously transgressing sexual and stylistic conventions, and of engaging with, even if not endorsing, a Byronic voice of dissent.

Mutability and reform are defining characteristics of Eliot's *Middlemarch*. In the novel, Will Ladislav is described as 'singular', an 'oddity' who raises speculation about his apparently dubious origins and scandalous connections with more than one married woman.⁹ With his 'quick and pliable' mind, this 'miscellaneous and bric-à-brac' fellow is, as Barbara Hardy comments, 'the nearest thing in the novel to a portrait of the artist, and a Romantic artist at that' (*M* 174, 359).¹⁰ Ladislav's comment to Dorothea that 'I should never succeed in anything by dint of drudgery. If things don't come easily to me I never get them' (*M* 172) is a distinctly Keatsian sentiment (echoing the poet's famous pronouncement 'That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all').¹¹ Yet it is Ladislav's resemblance to Shelley that has been commented upon by critics.¹² Influenced by G. H. Lewes's conviction that Shelley was 'the original man, the hero', Eliot admired the poet's aesthetic principles; her familiarity with Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry' is evident in the following speech by Ladislav.¹³

To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion – a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only. (*M* 186)¹⁴

Inherited directly from Shelley, Ladislav's susceptibility to external stimuli means that his

responses shift constantly and he is open, in direct contrast to Casaubon, to a range of ideas and sensations.

Being 'made of very impressible stuff', a living embodiment of the Æolian harp that confirms his Romantic credentials, Ladislav is keenly affected by Dorothea's opinions and feelings (*M* 320). When she is described as blooming in his presence, he also flourishes: 'Each looked at the other as if they had been two flowers which had opened then and there' (*M* 299). Eliot strengthens this romantic, and indeed Romantic, symbiosis when, as we discover in Rome, fragments 'stimulated his imagination', echoing Dorothea's description of jewels as 'fragments of heaven' (*M* 176, 10). Whilst such keen sensitivities are evidently Shelleyan, notably Byronic undertones are present when Dorothea feeds from Ladislav's rejuvenating potency; continuing the flower analogy noted above, she responds to his presence in the following terms: 'her face brightening and her head becoming a little more erect on its beautiful stem' (*M* 664). Ladislav's Byronic vitality, his association with spring-time fertility, harnesses the 'endless renewals' that are needed for youth to supplant the older generation. His triumph over the aged Casaubon recalls, in particular, the fall of the Titans, which is contemplated during Dorothea's bewildering stay in Rome (and also recalls Keats's *Hyperion* poems, *M* 186).

More explicitly Byronic, Ladislav adores only one woman. Like Conrad in *The Corsair*, 'for him earth held but her alone', and his treatment of the 'other' women who are attracted to him can be cold and vindictive (I. xiv. 480). After he is discovered comforting Rosamund in chapter 77, Ladislav's language is marked by an uncharacteristic violence; his words are 'lacerating', visceral 'knife-wound[s]' that are intended to cut the recipient (*M* 651, 656). Yet evidence of his emotional complexity is apparent immediately after this scene when we are told of his 'delicate generosity' to

another (in not disclosing Bulstrode's offer of reparation, *M* 643). Ladislav even proves capable of charming Casaubon over dinner in Rome, only then petulantly to reveal the futility of her husband's life's work to Dorothea. In the space of a single paragraph, Ladislav shifts from the Byronic 'depths of boredom' to a comic vision of a 'sheep-stealing epic written with Homeric particularity' (*M* 319).¹⁵ As capricious as his disposition, Ladislav's countenance is described as being as changeable as the weather, an analogy that generates parallels with other notable Byronic figures of the period. Just as Rochester's scowl can transform into a smile that conveys the 'real sunshine of feeling', so 'the cloud in his [Ladislav's] face broke into sunshiny laughter' (*M* 159).¹⁶ This capacity for 'metamorphosis' – to use Eliot's term – is a predominant feature of Victorian women writers' portraits of the Byronic hero (Charlotte Brontë, for example, uses the term 'metamorphosed' to describe Rochester's mercurial temperament).¹⁷

Commenting on the 1994 BBC adaptation of *Middlemarch*, which I shall be discussing in more detail shortly, Ian MacKillop and Alison Platt raise a common objection – the 'flattening' of character. In this case they argue, 'there is not much more to Ladislav than the drop-dead-gorgeousness of his appearance'.¹⁸ Another critic, Bernard O'Keefe, also asks 'Would George Eliot have approved of the smouldering Ladislav?'¹⁹ It is noticeable that the 'light brown curls' and 'grey eyes' of Eliot's hero are exchanged in the BBC adaptation for dark, Byronic features, and his more amiable moments are replaced with a glower (*M* 63, 65). Rather than the 'very pretty sprig' that Mrs Cadwallader describes, or the frivolous, light, and somewhat unheroic, *dilettante* that readers and critics alike have objected to, Ladislav's presence is now imposing (*M* 271).²⁰ However, it is worth remembering that when Dorothea first meets Ladislav in Eliot's novel, he is brooding with 'discontent' and displays a

'threatening aspect' that disturbs both the heroine and the reader (*M* 65). Later passages describe a delicate profile coloured by temper and 'defiant curves of lip and chin' that recall the trademark features of the Byronic hero (*M* 299).

As critics have often noted, Eliot declared in 1869 – the year she began the stories which became *Middlemarch* – that 'Byron and his poetry have become more and more repugnant to me of late years'.²¹ Yet despite such protestations, which have effectively curtailed examinations of Byron's influence on her, Eliot retained a certain fascination for the poet. From an early age, Eliot gained a great deal of pleasure from Byron's poetry, regarding it as amongst 'standard works whose contents are matter of constant reference'.²² The scandal over his relationship with Augusta Leigh has often been given as a reason for Eliot's changing regard for the poet: she was, in fact, far more indignant about the public discussion of incest than by Byron's involvement – exclaiming to a friend, 'No! I do not agree with you about Mrs. Stowe and the Byron case. [...] In my judgment the course she took was socially injurious' – and states that the story 'may even *possibly* be false'; in any event, Byron 'remains deeply pitiable, like all of us sinners' (15th May 1877, 23rd August 1869, original emphasis).²³ Moreover, Eliot's letters reveal that she continued to read, re-read and quote from Byron's work long after she supposedly rejected the poet.²⁴ In terms of her fiction, *Felix Holt* and the epic poem *The Spanish Gypsy* may denounce egotism and promote the Carlylean values of the hero-reformer, yet the strong Byronic presence in both these works facilitates a dialogue over contentious issues, such as politics and sexual morality, which, for Alicia Carroll, culminate in the character of Will Ladislav.²⁵

When Mrs Cadwallader describes Ladislav as 'A sort of Byronic hero – an amorous conspirator', she perceptively relates Ladislav's

local involvement with reform to Byron's political pursuits (*M* 313). Moreover, potentially seditious conduct is here conflated with sexual attraction, an association that is emphasised in the BBC adaptation. In addition to Brooke's direct comparison of Ladislav to the poet, 'he may turn out a Byron', Eliot also emphasises Ladislav's pride, his 'gnashing impetuosity' and frequently irritable disposition (Lydgate, for example, describes him as being 'like a bit of tinder', *M* 67, 181, 385). Relishing spontaneity and eager to cast off restrictions at home, in his Grand Tour of Europe Ladislav resembles the wandering Childe Harold while his experiments with wine and opium, albeit ironically deflated by Eliot, recall the Byronic hero's desire for sensation to revitalise a sated soul. Although Ladislav is undeniably more sociable and less morbid than many of Byron's protagonists, his feelings for Dorothea, and their forbidden love, are coloured by Byronic undertones; indeed, the course of their relationship makes good of the Giaour's claim that 'love will find its way/ Through paths where wolves would fear/ to prey' (1048–9).

Ladislav's fondness for Romantic rhetoric, envisaging himself engaged in 'an unavoidable feat of heroism' is, however, the subject of mild mockery (*M* 174).

Will did not know what to say, since it would not be useful for him to embrace her slippers, and tell her that he would die for her: it was clear that she required nothing of the sort. (*M* 184)

As Barbara Hardy states, 'worship, adoration, higher love-poetry, queens, and foot-stools are inappropriate images for love in the quotidian world of *Middlemarch*' ('*Middlemarch* and the Passions', 16). Yet Ladislav is not rendered ridiculous. As the narrator's voice transiently inhabits a character's consciousness, employing the same power to shift perspectives that Ladislav is endowed with, it is, on occasion, infused with his overblown language.

Moreover, the deflation of his endearingly inappropriate idealization of Dorothea as a goddess, poem or work of art is not too dissimilar to the narrator's increasing scepticism at such untenable image-worship in the Preface. In other words, Ladislav, who can be read, in part, as an incarnation of the narrator's strengths and weaknesses, is only guilty of the narrator's own former imprudence. Furthermore, the hero himself comments on how 'Worship is usually a matter of theory rather than of practice. But I am practising it to excess just at this moment', suggesting that his infatuation is determined by a Romantic model that he both subscribes to and scrutinizes (*M* 359). Ladislav not only benefits from the author's preferential treatment, much to the consternation of many readers and critics, but also displays a disarming self-awareness of his own flaws.

This playfully ironic regard of Will's melodramatic imagination is somewhat lost in the BBC adaptation. Omitting all dialogue from the final love scene, doubt and reticence are replaced by Dorothea symbolically dead-heading flowers – a strong visual sign of renewal – and Ladislav demonstrating his determined, purposeful stride over lush green grounds (reminding the viewer, once again, of his manly vigour).²⁶ The 'uncertain promises' heralded by the hero and his relationship with Dorothea are resolved quickly and unambiguously, passion presumably transcending the need for words (*M* 389). Andrew Davies's revision is curious given not only the emphasis accorded to the love story in this adaptation, but also the inherent drama of Eliot's original scene in which the lovers attempt to reconcile themselves to separation. As MacKillop and Platt comment,

In the novel Ladislav and Dorothea only just make it. Her release from paralysis, her sobbing admission that she hates her wealth, might have been kept in check until after

Ladislav's departure. The BBC offers a muffled cry where they could have offered a roar. ('Beholding in a magic panorama', 78)

Representing another significant alteration, the scene now takes place on a tranquil sunny day. As such, the adaptation sacrifices the tension generated between the tempestuous weather and the characters' emotions, which encapsulates some of the most profound and unresolved issues of Eliot's novel. The storm symbolises Ladislav and Dorothea's frustrated desires and animates their feelings for one another, yet the outer turbulence also represents discord (the weather is initially at odds with the strained scene within). Ladislav's Romantic posturing, presenting himself as 'one on the brink of the grave', does not elicit the intended response from Dorothea (*M* 665). Recalling the couple's first meeting when Dorothea confesses that Ladislav's is a 'language I do not understand', she now checks his hyperbole: 'No – don't say that – your life need not be maimed' (*M* 65, 666). Will's emotional outpouring, which embodies the 'angry spirit' of the storm, is both fervent and trembling, yet he is blind, as he has often been, to Dorothea's needs (*M* 666). She pulls away from Will's embrace to comfort herself with more practical plans, recognising that there are, in Barbara Hardy's words, 'limits of adoration'.²⁷ This unpremeditated and not wholly satisfying union – raising the question of whether Dorothea is affirming the progressive energy of life or temporarily responding to Will's spontaneity as Rosamund has previously responded to hers – does, however, prefigure the unpredictable future outlined in the novel's conclusion. Marriages, the narrator tells us, are great beginnings as well as endings, and the Finale speculates upon rather than dictates the possible destinies of the central characters.²⁸

Like *Middlemarch*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* is a novel concerned with reform,

which generates a series of conflicts that are never fully resolved. As Gaskell pondered in relation to the novel: 'How am I to reconcile all these warring members?' (April 1850). Rosemarie Bodenheimer sees *North and South* as Gaskell's most radical novel 'because it is so good at posing knotted issues and feelings that cannot come formally to rest except in the depiction of ongoing process and readjustment'.²⁹ The most complex site of conflict in the novel derives not from Gaskell's strikers, but from the emergence of the claims of the individual. One individual, in particular, is the source of much consternation. The master of Marlborough Mill, John Thornton, is abrupt and proud with no apparent interest in philanthropy at the beginning of the novel: yet he does not lack integrity and, through him, we see a respectable man suffer from the vicissitudes of trade. Noted for his 'great force of character', Thornton's 'unusual intellect' draws out Mr Hale's innermost thoughts and his eloquence temporarily eclipses the workers' claims in the struggle with their masters.³⁰ Yet Gaskell retracts nothing of her earlier novel *Mary Barton*. Thornton's 'sound economical principles', which preclude humanitarian concerns, render him a self-confessed autocrat (*N&S* 152). Indeed, it is his firm authority that generates the most problematic, and noticeably Byronic, aspect of the novel.

Gaskell's response to Byron has received even less critical attention than Eliot's. Some of Gaskell's earlier short stories advocate what could be read as anti-Byronic sentiments: 'The Sexton's Hero', for example, defines heroism in terms of duty and sacrifice, while 'The Heart of John Middleton' centres on a protagonist who gains pleasure from reading Byron's narratives and is misguidedly motivated by hatred and revenge.³¹ Byron's poetry is also alluded to on a number of occasions in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's last, unfinished novel: yet, as Julia M. Wright has noted, these references are

associated with the less sympathetic, superficial characters.³² On first impressions, therefore, Gaskell seems, as initially appears to be the case with Eliot, to dismiss Byron and the profligacy that he became synonymous with in the Victorian period. However, even if Byron was evoked, along with other poets of the time, to exorcise and circumvent an indulgent strain of Romanticism, what remains incontestable is that he was a constant and significant presence in Gaskell's fiction. For example, the following quotation from Byron's poem *The Island* acts as an epigraph for the final chapter of the first volume in *North and South*:

Revenge may have her own:

Roused discipline aloud proclaims their cause,
And injured navies urge their broken laws.³³

These lines strenuously support Frederick's mutiny and the actions of the workers in the strike scene, yet the word 'discipline' raises the ethical problems of duty and conscience that also relate to Boucher's dealings with the Union and his subsequent suicide, and Margaret's dishonesty after the accidental death of Leonards. The relevance of this quotation is not, therefore, as straightforward as it may seem; the semantic indeterminacy of these lines highlights and reinforces the competing claims that Gaskell constructs in *North and South*. Furthermore, as Larry K. Uffelman states in relation to this novel, 'The epigraphs, identified in Angus Easson's edition, indicate a wide range of reading, but also suggest favourites'.³⁴ I would argue that Gaskell, like Eliot, read, re-read and engaged with Byron's poetry throughout her life. As Jenny Uglow reminds us, Gaskell read *The Corsair* with enthusiasm, in marked contrast to Austen's famous dismissal, and often quoted the poet.³⁵ A particularly telling instance in Gaskell's literary relationship with Byron relates to a proposed series of works that were intended to imitate poets depicting scenes of Victorian life; although the project was abandoned, Gaskell

read lots of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and, most significantly, finished 'all my *composition* of *Ld Byron*' (original emphasis).³⁶

Returning to *North and South*, like all Byronic heroes who 'Time hath not yet the features fix'd,/ But brighter traits with evil mix'd' (*The Giaour*, 861–2), John Thornton is a 'puzzle', Gaskell's term for a character she intended to make 'large and strong and tender, and yet a master' (27th October 1854, original emphasis). Barnes Stevenson raises a number of insightful questions on this issue:

In a real sense, Gaskell here confronts the conflicting discourses of masculinity in her society: how can her character be "a master", an "entrepreneurial man", and also be a "developed" human being? How can a novelist create consistency between inconsistent ideologies? ('Romance and the Self-Made Man', 14)

The author's concerns, as quoted above, over the reconciliation of warring members are reflected in the heroine's attempts to negotiate her widely conflicting responses to Thornton: 'How reconcile those eyes, that voice, with the hard-reasoning, dry, merciless way in which he laid down axioms of trade, and serenely followed them out to their full consequences? The discord jarred upon her inexpressibly'; and she openly tells him, 'I am trying to reconcile your admiration of despotism with your respect for other men's independence of character' (*N&S* 153, 124).

Despite such attempts to reconcile Thornton's character, he remains a repository of conflicting, and ultimately irreconcilable, impulses, which effectively represent the author's own struggles in *North and South*. He is necessarily at the forefront of debates about masculinity, but even more importantly, he functions as an embodiment of the ideological indeterminacy, the stubborn contradictions, that exemplify this novel. As such, Thornton

plays a pivotal role in one of the greatest achievements of the Victorian novel, the tension generated between social concerns and romance in *North and South*. This resonant partnership, which problematises the boundaries between public and private conflicts, is immediately apparent in the scene where Thornton first appears in the 2004 BBC adaptation of *North and South*.³⁷ Upon entering the mill – where Gaskell never takes us in the novel – Margaret is bewildered by an intense working environment in which the air is thick with the effluvia of cotton. The scene is visually arresting; at once a winter wonderland and, as the heroine's cough reminds us, the cause of high mortality rates amongst the workers. Margaret first sees Thornton, a strikingly dark figure, through this confetti-like snow, which conflates, in a single image, both the social agenda and the romance plot of the novel. The rhythm of the machines and the aura of unnatural calm are shattered by Thornton as he shouts at a worker and then proceeds to beat him even after he has fallen to the ground.³⁸ As a witness to his violent misconduct, Margaret's intervention, which acts as an effective precursor to the strike scene, is met by a fierce, and gendered, invective as he barks 'Get that woman out of here'.

Thornton's anger and iron will render him, as Frederick later comments, an 'unprepossessing' fellow in both Gaskell's novel and the BBC adaptation (*N&S* 263). Margaret questions whether Thornton can ever meet her somewhat out-dated ideal of a gentleman while her father dismisses his credentials as a leading man: 'I don't set him up for a hero, or anything of that kind' (*N&S* 88). Yet although Thornton's lack of pretension and absence of guilt mark significant departures from the customary Byronic traits, there are many significant parallels. His physical prowess, dark hair and pale, marble features are directly descended from portraits of Byron and illustrations of his protagonists; even more

notable are the 'flaming eyes' (N&S 313) and penetrating stare that call to mind descriptions of the awe-inspiring 'evil eye' in the Oriental Tales.³⁹ Thornton's steadfast resolve, which goads the desperate workers in the strike scene, also recalls Conrad's ability to say 'Do this! – 'tis done/ [...] all obey and few inquire his will' (*The Corsair*, 1. ii. 77, 80). Above all, it is Thornton's 'strange wild passionate way' (N&S 197), his simultaneous love and hatred for the heroine, that coincides with the fevered veins and 'bursting heart' of the Byronic hero (*The Giaour*, 1107). Gaskell's erotic description of Thornton's 'Charybdis of passion', a 'stinging pleasure' that he attempts to crush by clenching his fists, is a variant on the motif of the serpent curled within the hero's chest, a recurring image in many of Byron's poems (N&S 270, 239). This 'positive bodily pain', revealing the hero's subversive longing for violent penetration, demonstrates not only his psychological complexity, but also illuminates Gaskell's subtle revisions of her Romantic predecessor (N&S 207).

What Gaskell presents as Thornton's rough, Northern manner is transformed in the BBC adaptation into an uncontrollable, and on occasion vicious, temper which has more in common with the 'peevisish hectic' that passes along Conrad's cheek than the original character (*The Corsair*, II. iv. 109). The initial portrait of Thornton as a hard, cruel master is re-emphasised at the end of the first episode when we are taken back into the mill; once again, the focus is on his dark profile, but now there is no suggestion of romance in either the work or the master. Viewed through the perspective of Margaret's voice-over – 'I believe I've seen hell and it's white, snow white' – Thornton now resembles a devil presiding over his satanic mill.⁴⁰ However, as a consequence of accentuating Thornton's thorny, unappealing side, and thereby capitalising on the Byronic hero's precarious morality, the BBC adaptation loses some of the resolutely open-ended

depiction of character that distinguishes Gaskell's novel.

Often overlooked in this adaptation are the glimpses of Thornton's 'inexpressible gentleness' and the noble actions that go some way to offsetting his cruel and, at times, savage behaviour towards Margaret (N&S 82). For the on-screen heroine, who has regarded Thornton with a mixture of disapproval and awe rather than attraction, the final scene poses something of a problem. The neck of Thornton's heavily starched shirt is now unbuttoned – a sign of physical release and a visual allusion to the trademark open-necked shirt of the Byronic hero – his face is softened and his sneer is teased into a smile: equally, however, Thornton pointedly refuses to engage with Margaret's business proposal (exacerbating our unease at Margaret's imminent loss of her newly-found financial independence at the end of Gaskell's novel). Rather than the exquisitely ambivalent 'gentle violence' that transfers to Margaret in the closing lines of the text, indicating a continuing and evolving power struggle after marriage, Thornton retains an incontestable mastery by holding her face in his hands (N&S 436). The dominant masculinity that has been somewhat controversially exposed, questioned and revised throughout the adaptation is now repackaged as sexually appealing. What Uffelman describes as the emergence of a "'new" plot' in the closing chapters of *North and South*, with Thornton in the disorientating position of a bankrupt master who is dependent on his future wife, is ultimately rejected in favour of a more conventional romantic ending ('Novel in Progress', 76).

Prior to the final scenes, however, Thornton's heightened defiance and rage does draw attention to the political issues of despotism, slavery and liberty that underpins much of Gaskell's, and indeed Byron's, work. The adaptation effectively exacerbates tensions between north and south, gentlemen and the self-made man, genteel poverty and new

money, and renders the prospect of romance amongst such opposition increasingly unlikely. In this way, Richard Armitage's Thornton, akin to Rufus Sewell's feisty portrayal of Ladislav in the BBC adaptation of *Middlemarch*, intensifies the friction between personal and public interrelations that, as outlined above, are central to Gaskell's novel. Thornton becomes, as Nancy Armstrong defines Heathcliff, an 'impossible third term' that problematises concepts of romance and 'reality'. Therefore, while the softer, tender side of Gaskell's character remains hidden for much of the BBC adaptation, Armitage's Thornton showcases one of the Byronic hero's most coveted traits – his ability to evade or contravene conventions.

Given the all too common preconception that adaptations reduce or limit their source, it is easy to overlook what they bring to readings of the text. For example, in the BBC adaptation of *North and South*, Thornton's progressive outlook is emphasised as he strikes out amongst the masters to improve the working conditions in his mill. Similarly, in the BBC adaptation of *Middlemarch*, Ladislav's interest in reform is no longer portrayed as his latest whim or an expedient for staying close to the heroine. Episode 3 opens with Will at the centre of local talk about emancipation suggesting that he, like the Giaour, may be a 'stray renegade' (*The Giaour*, 812).⁴¹ Yet his Romantic rebelliousness is, crucially for Eliot, directed towards the general good; we are told that 'the easily-stirred rebellion in him helped with the glow of public spirit', formulating, in effect, an unlikely alliance between the Byronic hero and Carlyle's hero-reformer (*M* 380). Portraying Will from the outset as the 'ardent public man' that he is to become in Eliot's Finale, and thereby elevating him to one of the moral centres of the story, provoked controversy amongst reviewers who argued that Dorothea, and indeed Eliot, had been eclipsed as the formidable forces of the novel.⁴² Aside from the predictable issues of authenticity, what is more striking about these

adaptations is that they retain, and in some instances elaborate upon, the Byronic hero's capacity for disorder and renewal. It is not merely the sensationalised aspects of Byron's reputation that account for this figure's continued appeal; his extremes of temperament – the conflation of opposing and often dissident characteristics – catalysed the ideological indeterminacy that proved central to both *Middlemarch* and *North and South*. Moreover, through modern screen adaptations, the Byronic hero's regenerative potential, his propensity to critique and be critiqued in turn, continues to flourish. As Samuel Chew predicted, Byron 'was not, and he has never been, among those whom the world willingly lets die'.⁴³

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NOTES

1. Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge, 1995), 8.
2. Susan J. Wolfson, 'Hemans and the Romance of Byron', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills, 2001), 155–80, 172.
3. Caroline Franklin, *Byron and Women Novelists* (Nottingham, 2001), 33.
4. *Don Juan* I. i. 1. All references to Byron's poem are taken from *Byron: Poetical Works*, ed. Frederick Jump (Oxford, 1970) and will subsequently appear in the text. J. R. Watson, 'Elizabeth Gaskell: Heroes and Heroines, and *Sylvia's Lovers*', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 18 (2001), 81–94, 81. Watson sees *Sylvia's Lovers* as the novel where heroism is most consistently discussed and where Gaskell's intellectual and literary debt to Thomas Carlyle, and in particular his work *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, is most apparent.
5. Joseph Kestner, 'Men in Female Condition of England Novels', in *Men by Women* (New York and London, 1981), 77–100, 78; Catherine Barnes Stevenson, 'Romance and the Self-Made Man: Gaskell Rewrites Brontë', *Victorian Newsletter*, 91 (Spring 1997), 10–16, 10.
6. Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction* (London, 1956), 383.

7. Letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, dated 14th May 1850, original emphasis. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester, 1966), 116. Subsequent references to Gaskell's letters refer to this edition and will be dated in the text.
8. Terence Hoagwood cited in Timothy J. Wandling, 'Early Romantic Theorists and the Fate of Transgressive Eloquence: John Stuart Mill's Response to Byron', in *Nervous Reactions: Victorian Recollections of Romanticism* (Albany, 2004), 123–40, 128.
9. George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (Ware, 1994), 158, 382. All subsequent references refer to this edition of the novel and will appear in the text.
10. Barbara Hardy, 'Middlemarch and the Passions', in *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1975), 3–21, 13.
11. Letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818. The edition referred to is *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970), 70. Eliot owned a copy of Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats* (1848) which includes the relevant passage from this letter, and a first edition of *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, 1820. 'Isabella', in particular, preoccupied Eliot at this time; she alludes to the poem in a letter dated 27 June 1868 and makes a further reference in the Finale of *Middlemarch* when Lydgate envisages his wife as a basil plant 'flourish[ing] wonderfully on a murdered man's brains' (M 686).
12. See, for example, Roland A. Duerksen, 'Shelley in Middlemarch', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 14 (1965), 23–31.
13. According to Duerksen, Lewis's veneration of Shelley was a response to Carlyle's lectures on *Heroes and Hero-Worship*.
14. Compare with the following from Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry':
 Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. [...] for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed [...]. [The poet] is more delicately organised than other men, and sensible to pain and pleasure, both his own and that of others, in a degree unknown to them.
 The edition referred to is *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2 edn (New York and London, 2002), 509–35, 531, 534.
15. Ladislav's humorous daydream is, however, complicated by an earlier, serious discussion of the sheep-stealer who is to be hanged.
16. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London, 2002), 273.
17. Eliot uses the term to describe Ladislav in chapter 21, and it is subsequently applied to Dorothea in chapter 50 (M 174, 405). Brontë also employs the term to describe Rochester towards the end of *Jane Eyre*, 484–5.
18. *Middlemarch*, dir. Anthony Page (BBC, 1994). Ian MacKillop and Alison Platt, "'Beholding in a magic panorama": television and the illustration of Middlemarch', in *The Classic Novel: From Page to Screen* (Manchester 2000), 71–92, 82. MacKillop and Platt also exclaim, 'The TV Ladislav is so attractive, so Byronic', 89.
19. Bernard O'Keefe, 'The Soaping of Middlemarch', *English Review*, 5.2 (1994), 7–12, 11.
20. For an account of Ladislav's mixed reception, see Gordon S. Haight, 'George Eliot's "eminent failure", Will Ladislav', in *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1975), 22–42.
21. Letter to Mrs Charles Bray, 23 August 1869. The edition of Eliot's letters referred to is *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (9 vols, London and New Haven, 1956–78), v 54.
22. Cited in Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford, 1968), 23.
23. In a letter to John Blackwood, dated 21st April 1873, Eliot stresses her objection: 'I was proportionately enraged about that execrable discussion raised in relation to Byron. The deliberate insistence on the subject was a worse crime against society than the imputed fact'.
24. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot alludes to the following lines from *Manfred* when describing Dorothea's profound impression on Lydgate: 'The dead, but sceptred sovereigns, who still rule/ Our spirits from their urns' (III. iv. 40–1). These lines prefigure the 'incalculably diffusive' effect ascribed to the heroine in the concluding paragraph of the novel; crucially, however, Dorothea is not an eminent figure, but lives a poignantly hidden life (M 688). This instance illustrates the

- simultaneously reverential yet revisionary treatment of Byron and his poetry in Eliot's work.
25. See Alicia Carroll, 'The Giaour's Campaign: Desire and the Other in *Felix Holt, The Radical*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 30. 2 (Winter 1997), 237–58. For further discussion of the Byronic in *The Spanish Gypsy*, see K. M. Newton, 'Byronic Egoism and George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*', *Neophilologus*, 57 (1973), 388–400.
 26. David Gervais states that as a 'classic' BBC adaptation with a budget of over £6m, *Middlemarch* was transformed into 'a seamless patchwork of beautifully finished images'. See 'Televising *Middlemarch*', *English*, 43 (1994), 59–64, 59.
 27. "Middlemarch and the Passions", 16. Haight categorically states that '*Middlemarch* is no romance' ('Eliot's "Eminent Failure"', 40).
 28. As Barbara Hardy states, 'There is a strong and deliberate suggestion of the possible lives her characters might have lived'. See 'Possibilities', in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* (Boston, 1965), 325–38, 326; and J. Hillis Miller, 'A Conclusion in Which Almost Nothing is Concluded', in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford 2006), 133–56.
 29. Rosemarie Bodenheimer, 'North and South: A Permanent State of Change', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 34.3 (December 1979), 281–301, 282.
 30. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Oxford, 1982), 163, 167. All subsequent references refer to this edition and will appear in the text.
 31. The edition of Gaskell's short stories referred to is *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Joanne Shattock, *Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, ed. Joanne Shattock (10 vols, London, 2005–06), i. 73–80, 176–96.
 32. Julia M. Wright, "'Growing Pains": Representing the Romantic in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, in *Nervous Reactions: Victorian Recollections of Romanticism* (Albany, 2004), 163–85. While this essay focuses on *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's engagement with Romantic writers is equally noticeable in *North and South* where she quotes, amongst others, Coleridge, Hemans, Shelley, and Byron.
 33. *N&S*, 197. Quotation from Byron's *The Island*, I. x. 202–4.
 34. Larry K. Uffelman, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*: the Novel in Progress', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 14 (2000), 73–84, 76.
 35. See Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London, 1993), 39–42. In a letter to her sister, dated 5th March 1814, Austen wrote, 'I have read the *Corsair*, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do'. *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1995). Like Eliot and Gaskell, Austen's literary engagements with Byron are far more complex and significant than this quotation suggests. See Sarah Wootton, 'The Byronic in Austen's *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*', *Modern Language Review*, 102. 1 (January 2007), 26–39.
 36. Cited in Uglow, 99. See also Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London, 1979), 22.
 37. *North and South*, dir. Brian Percival (BBC, 2004). During his first proposal Thornton employs a discourse of conflict to which Margaret mentally responds: 'Their intercourse had been one continued series of opposition. Their opinions clashed' (*N&S* 197).
 38. Whilst Richard Armitage's performance as John Thornton was extremely well-received, winning him the accolade of Best Actor in a Drama for 2004, many viewers complained about this scene on the BBC's website (for example, 'Major gripe is the brutalising of Mr. Thornton'). See http://www.bbc.co.uk/northandsouth/episode2_yourreviews. 9 April 2007. I am grateful to my PhD student, Rebecca White, for directing me to this site.
 39. The description of Thornton's eyes glowing 'like red embers' is particularly Byronic (*N&S* 360). See, for example, *The Giaour*, lines 832–41, for a striking depiction of 'that dilating eye' (834).
 40. Margaret's voice-over provides an example of why the BBC adaptation was, on the whole, a successful adaptation of the novel; this quotation, inverting our preconceptions of hell, replicates Gaskell's use of paradox and complementary opposites.
 41. MacKillop and Platt notably associate Ladislav's political acumen with the later Byron ('Beholding in a magic panorama', 82).
 42. On the issue of Dorothea's displacement, see, for example, Adatto Kiku, 'Missing the Glory: *Middlemarch* by George Eliot', *Commonweal*, 121 (July 1994), 21–3.
 43. Samuel C. Chew, *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame* (London, 1924), 220.